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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AIAG (DAVID WINN), NEA/ELA
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SUBJECT: H1N1'S IMPACT ON EGYPT'S SCHOOL SYSTEM

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

1.(SBU) Key Points:

--Egypt's Ministries of Health and Education are spearheading the GoE's H1N1 education planning and have outlined how the virus will impact the country's school system.

--The GoE is prepared to close all of the country's schools and universities in the event of a H1N1 epidemic and have devised specific criteria in how they will make this decision.

-- At this time, the GoE plans to allow the hajj to proceed although it will continue to maintain previously announced restrictions for potential pilgrims.

12. (U) Emboff met with Dr. Nasr El-Sayed, first undersecretary for preventive and endemic affairs at the Ministry of Health (MoH), to discuss GoE H1N1 planning and its impact on the country's education system. El-Sayed oversees the MoH's influenza program and is a key advisor to Minister of Health Hatem El-Gabali.

Why is Egypt Delaying the School Year?

13. (SBU) Egypt's public schools and universities will begin classes on October 3. El-Sayed explained that the GoE pushed back the original September 26 start date because of significant H1N1 concerns. More than 150,000 Egyptians are scheduled to return in the next week from Umra (a minor religious pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia. El-Sayed noted that "some of these people could be teachers, students, and schools employees" and could transmit the virus to other individuals in the schools. He stated that waiting an additional seven to eight days would minimize the potential for infection in schools and universities.

Dedicated H1N1 Employees

14. (SBU) As schools began preparing for the start of the year, the Ministry of Education (MoE) sent guidelines to all principals to select one employee to serve as each schools' H1N1 representative. This individual's responsibility is to determine if anyone in the school exhibits H1N1 symptoms - such as a high fever, sore throat, or persistent cough. The representative has the authority to send home any individual with these symptoms and a medical doctor will then visit to monitor the situation. If H1N1-like symptoms continue for more than 24-48 hours, the individual will be admitted to a local hospital with a dedicated H1N1 ward. If this individual is a student or teacher, the principal will then shutter that particular class for two weeks and students will be placed under surveillance for seven days at their homes.

----- School Closures -----

15. (SBU) Despite recent media speculation that governors can close schools in the event of H1N1 outbreaks, El-Sayed emphasized several times that only the MoH and MoE possess this authority. This is a "national decision," to be undertaken jointly by the MoH and MoE, and "no one else." The ministries have the support of the Prime Minister in this decision-making process. El-Sayed explained the criteria in how the ministries will approach any school closure. If more than three H1N1 cases are confirmed at any school, the ministries will close that particular school for 2-4 weeks - the timeframe depends upon the severity of the infected individuals.

16. (SBU) El-Sayed also noted that the ministries have devised H1N1 criteria that would warrant closing the entire school system - from nursery schools to universities. For this to occur, the country would have to meet at least two of following three situations:

- a tenfold increase in any given week of confirmed hospitalized H1N1 cases
- the mortality rate of hospitalized H1N1 cases rises above 2%
- a 10% increase in the number of hospitalized H1N1 cases with respiratory problems

17. (SBU) According to El-Sayed, schools and universities would be closed "indefinitely." In addition, the GoE would shut down what the MoH labels "social gathering places and events" - specifically mentioning movie theaters and sporting matches. Government ministries would not be affected and employees would continue to report to their jobs.

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----- Al-Azhar Backs GoE Plans -----

18. (SBU) Egypt's religious leaders have agreed to support the MoH and MoE in their H1N1 preventive planning. In a September 14 meeting at Al Azhar mosque - the most important religious institution in the country - senior religious leaders and Al Azhar school directors agreed to support the MoH in all of their preventive planning regarding the country's school system. These instructions were provided directly from Grand Imam Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the leader of Al Azhar's mosque and university. He stated it was vital to follow MoH guidance concerning H1N1.

----- What of the Hajj? -----

19. (SBU) Despite rising H1N1 concerns, the GoE does not plan to stop Egyptians from undertaking hajj - which is likely to begin in late November. El-Sayed stressed that the MoH might revisit this decision later in the fall. However, previously announced restrictions for hajj will remain in place. According to the MoH, only adults between the ages of 25-65 years old will be allowed to travel for the hajj. Other high-risk traveler categories barred from hajj include pregnant women, obese individuals, and those with chronic ailments (such as diabetes, hypertension, and kidney problems).

Scobey